

BOOK REVIEW

Mearsheimer, John J. **The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.**
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John J. Mearsheimer is a renowned scholar of Political Science at the University of Chicago. His book “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics” is a seminal work on the nature, behaviour and conduct of great powers in the modern and post-modern international systems. His has based his research on the theory of “offensive realism”. The theory has been propounded by Mearsheimer himself, and is essentially a structural realist theory. In order to test his propositions, Mearsheimer has taken the support of huge historical evidence on the behaviour of great powers since 1792 until end of the 20th century. He has divided his book in ten chapters.

The first chapter “Introduction”, is actually an ‘abstract’ of his book, in which he explains the behaviour of great powers to assert that security competition and war cannot be purged away from the international system. Mearsheimer holds that any optimism regarding great power cooperation is unfounded, and the evidence of “perpetual peace” among great powers is minimal. The United States still maintains huge military presence in Europe and Northeast Asia. The European powers are still apprehensive of Germany, and the same is true in case of Northeast Asian powers like China and Russia about Japan. The possibility of clash between China and United States over Taiwan exists. Mearsheimer asserts that “the sad fact is that international politics has always been a ruthless and dangerous business, and it is likely to remain that way” (p.2). He contends that great powers are never satisfied with the distribution of power and always try to change it in their favour. Their desire for more power continues until a great power attains the status of a hegemon. He observes that “great powers are primed for offence” (p.3). They seek to gain power at the cost of other states. It is the structure of international system that forces them to act aggressively against each other. He aptly remarks:-

“This situation, which no one consciously designed or intended, is genuinely tragic. Great powers have no reason to fight each other- that are merely concerned with their own survival- nevertheless have little choice but to pursue power to seek to dominate the other states in the system” (p.3).

The crux of the offensive realism theory is that great powers are ordained to look for opportunities to maximize their power at the expense of each other. This intense security competition leads to war and immense bloodshed. The theory focuses on great powers because they have the largest impact on the international politics. The theory tells us a great deal about the international politics since 1792 till end of the 20th century; and has been used to make predictions about great power politics in the twenty-first century.

Mearsheimer explains how offensive realism is different from other realist theories. ‘Human nature realism’ is actually the ‘classical realism’, and Hans J. Morgenthau is its main proponent. According to this theory, “states are led by human beings who have a will to power hardwired in them at birth” (p.19); and states have limitless lust for power. Then there is the theory of ‘defensive realism’, which is also called “structural realism”. Its basic assumption is that “states merely aim to survive...They seek security” (p.19); and, due to the structure of international system and its condition of anarchy, great powers focus on balance of power. Mearshiemer states that his theory of offensive realism is also a structural theory. However, its main variation with regard to defensive realism is the question of how much power do states want. According to Mearshiemer, the International system compels the great powers to maximize their power, till such time that one of the great powers achieves the status of a regional hegemon- the best state for any great power. This is done through aggressive behaviour;

“Great powers behave aggressively not because they want to or because they possess some inner drive to dominate, but because they have to seek more power if they want to maximize their odds for survival” (p.21)

Chapter two of the book, “Anarchy and the Struggle for Power”, is the most important chapter in which Mearsheimer explains this theoretical framework. The rest of the book is the historical evidence to prove various hypotheses of the theory. The author argues that the great powers have always been searching for opportunities to become stronger than their adversaries and have hegemony as their ultimate objective. When one power achieves preponderance over other great powers, then it becomes a status quo power. The argument pre-supposes an international system that has many great powers, and every one of them has revisionist intentions at the core of their action. The competition and struggle of great powers in such a system is carried out to maximize their share of the world power.

Mearsheimer bases his explanation on five “bedrock assumptions”, which are to be considered simultaneously to understand the competition among the great powers to achieve hegemony. The five bedrock assumptions are in fact the basic assumptions of the realist theory that are known to the students of political science and international politics: “the international system is anarchic”; “great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability”; and therefore, they are dangerous to each other; “states can never be certain about other state’s intentions”, especially when it comes to the use of military power; “survival remains the basic objective of great powers”; “Great powers are rational actors”, and take rational decisions (p.30-31). It is only when all the five assumptions are synthesized together that offensive behaviour of states comes to the fore.

Mearsheimer explains the behavior of great powers in terms of “fear”, “self-help” and “power maximization”. He argues that “great powers fear each other”, and from the standpoint of one great power, all others are its enemies. Their military capability coupled with uncertainty about intentions and absence of a central authority (the author calls it 911- the number one can call whenever help is required), is the main basis of this fear. This is best exemplified by the apprehensions of United Kingdom and France about the dangers of German re-unification at the end of the Cold War. Consequently, the political competition among the great powers is dangerous as it

has often led to wars with massive casualties and disasters. In such a system, states vie to ensure their survival. For this they resort to “self-help” measures, which also include forming alliances with other great powers, and to change them immediately when their survival so demands. In the World War-II, the United States fought alongwith USSR and China against Germany and Japan. But immediately after the war, enemies and friend were quickly changed to Germany and Japan to fight a long Cold War against USSR and China.

Mearsheimer points out that when a state achieves hegemonic position, it becomes a status quo power. According to the author, the United State has been a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere for at least the past one hundred years. He argues that in the absence of achieving a clear cut nuclear superiority, it is impossible for any state to achieve status of a global hegemon. No power has ever achieved the status of a global hegemon. Even the Unites States has not achieved this status as it lacks the ability to project power into the territory of another great power due to the stopping power of water. Regional hegemony is the best state for a great power. Mearsheimer argues that power and fear are connected to one another. The more is the power possessed by a state, more is the fear it generates. Also, there is difference between “potential” and “actual” power. According to the author, “a state’s potential power is based on the size of population and the level of its wealths” and its actual power is situated in “its army and the air and naval forces that directly support it” (p.43). The author maintains that ”land power” component of the military power is the key component even in the nuclear age.

Power affects the intensity of fear. Nuclear states fear each other less than those states which had no nuclear weapons. It is because nuclear weapons reduce the likelihood of war between states. But possibility of war always remains and so does a degree of mutual fear. When great powers are separated by large water bodies, their offensive capability reduces, and so does the level of fear. The distribution of power among states also affects the level of fear. The author believes that more fear is generated in a multipolar system which contains a potential hegemon, and this is referred to by the

author as “unbalanced multipolarity”. A multipolar system, without a potential hegemon is called “balanced multipolarity”. In such a system, power gaps among great powers are not very pronounced. The author postulates that the great powers balance each other against capabilities not against intentions. While stating “the hierarchy of state goals”, the author opines that survival is the number one goal followed by economic prosperity, welfare of citizenry, promotion of ideology, national re-unification and fostering human rights. It is accepted by offensive realism that great powers do pursue these non-security goals, but as long as they do not jeopardize the balance of power logic.

In chapter three “Wealth and Power”, the author defines power and gives methods to measure it. He looks at power as being based on material capabilities possessed by a state. Therefore, according to Mearsheimer, balance of power is done by employing tangible assets like nuclear weapons, armoured divisions and fleets. State’s power comprises latent power and military power. Latent power is made up of socio-economic ingredients which are state’s wealth, size and population. These ingredients go on to build the military power. In international politics, a state’s effective power is ultimately a function of its military forces vis-à-vis military forces of other states. Therefore, balance of power is essentially the balance of military power. Author’s offensive realism emphasizes force as the ultimate arbiter of international politics. At the same time, states pay serious attention to the balance of latent power also. The source of military power is the population and wealth of great powers. Out of the two, the author takes wealth alone to quantify military power, because wealth includes both demographic and economic dimensions of power. Mobilized wealth means the economic resources a state has at its disposal to build military forces, and how much wealth is available to spend on defence. Highly industrialized states have more surplus wealth than semi-industrialized states, and the states with high-tech industries are liable to produce sophisticated weaponry.

The author argues that distribution of wealth had been the main cause for rise or fall of the three European great powers - France, Germany and Russia -during the last two centuries. According to the historical evidence, German wealth in World War-I

was much more than Russia's; so German Army defeated the Russian Army. In World War-II, Russia was able to convert its superior latent power into military might much more effectively, so she defeated the German army. At times, wealthy states don't build additional military forces or enter into arms race, because they calculate that doing so would not give them better strategic position. So they hold back and wait for more opportune times. From 1815 to 1914, the United Kingdom was the wealthiest state in Europe. But she never translated her latent power into military might to become a hegemon, because it realized the huge problems in projecting its power across the English Channel. At times, states conclude that excessive defence spending might be bad for economy, and at other time wealthy allies can compensate for a state's expenditure on its military. Distribution of economic might cannot exactly be equated with distribution of military might. Germany had more than 3:1 advantage in economic terms over Soviet Union in 1942. However, over the next three years, Russian economy translated into military might with amazing efficiency, and Red Army prevailed over German Army. Although wealth is the foundation of military power of a state, but wealth is not synonymous with military might.

In chapter four "The Primacy of Land Power", Mearsheimer argues that power in international politics is largely a result of military forces a state possesses. There are four types of military powers among which states choose: independent sea power, strategic air power, land power and nuclear weapons. The author believes that land power is the dominant form of military power. Power of state is situated in its army and air and naval forces which support it. The offensive realism dictates that "most powerful states possess the most formidable armies" (p.83). Hence quantification of the power of land forces provides an approximate relative power balance of the great powers; and large bodies of water severely limit the power projection capacity of land forces. The stopping power of water- the oceans and seas- is an important limitation to the very concept of global hegemony.

The author disagrees with Mahan's theory of independent sea power and Douhet's theory of strategic air power. Mearsheimer maintains that wars are won by big battalions and not by sea or air

units. Even in the nuclear environment, where the great powers have involved in intense security competition, armies and “the air and naval forces that support them” is the core ingredient of military balance. Armies are the main instrument for conquering and controlling the land which is the ultimate political objective. Navy and air forces can’t conquer land; they only coerce the adversary.

As regards the nuclear weapons and the balance of power, the author observes that these weapons are revolutionary, as they can cause unprecedented destruction in matter of seconds. The author holds the view that even in case of mutually destructive nuclear deterrence, the security competition between great powers continues, and the land power remains the key component of the military power. However, possession of nuclear weapons adds caution to the use of military force by one great power against the other. He gives evidence of 1973 Arabs-Israel War, where Egypt and Syria fought against a nuclear Israel; the war between Russia and China along Ussuri River in 1969, where both had the nuclear arsenal; and India and Pakistan who were embroiled in serious crisis in 1990, and the border war in Kargil in 1999. He concludes that land power remains central to military power even in the nuclear age, although, nuclear weapons make great power war less likely.

In chapter five “Strategies for Survival”, the author discusses the strategies used by great powers to maximize their share of world power. The main objectives of a great power are: hegemony in their region; ability to project power across stopping power of water, achievement of wealth, development of large land forces and supporting naval and air forces and achievement of the nuclear superiority. “War” is the main strategy that the great powers employ to gain power. Then is “blackmail”, which is threat of force and not its actual use, to produce results. Blackmail is a complicated strategy because great powers are likely to fight it out than to be blackmailed. “Bait and bleed” is another strategy where a state weakens its rival by provoking a long and expensive war between the rival state and another state. Another strategy is “bloodletting”, where a state ensures that the war in which its adversary is involved, is made long and protracted. Soviet War in Afghanistan (1979 -1989) is a classical example of this strategy.

“Balancing” and “buck passing” are strategies to prevent an aggressor from upsetting the balance of power. Balancing is employed when states get together to balance or fight an aggressor. In buck passing, states try to get another great power to check the aggressor, and they themselves remain on the sidelines. The responsibility is passed on to the other state by the threatened states. Then there are avoiding strategies of “appeasement” and “band wagoning”. In these strategies, power is conceded to the adversary, and hence great powers don’t generally follow them. In bandwagon a threatened state joins the powerful state after recognizing that it can’t stand the aggressor alone. In appeasement, a state aims to adjust the behaviour of the aggressor by conceding some of its power to the aggressor. The most important strategies used by the great powers remain war for acquiring additional power, and balancing and buck passing for preserving the balance of power.

In chapter six “Great Powers in Action”, Mearsheimer examines the behaviour of great powers to prove that great powers seek regional hegemony. Based on exhaustive evidence from the history, the author establishes that revisionist great powers have been fighting with each other to maximize their share of world power. Also, when one of them achieves the status of regional hegemon, then it becomes a status-quo state. Great powers have not denied themselves the opportunity to shift the balance of power in their favour. And, the desire to acquire more power does not stop even when they have had the maximum of it. By examining the foreign policy behaviour of five dominant powers over the last 150 years, the author has skillfully established the above stated premises of the offensive realism. These powers have always expanded through conquest, invariably seized any opportunity to change balance of power in their favour, with gaining of power each one showed appetite to gain even more to reach the status of a regional hegemon. In the nuclear age, both the United States and the Soviet Union did not remain contented with Mutual Assessed Destruction (MAD) situation; both strived to achieve nuclear superiority over the other all the way till end of the cold war.

In chapter seven “The Offshore Balancers”, the author examines his theory by selecting the American and the British cases,

as they provide the strongest evidence against the offensive realism's argument that great powers are dedicated to maximize their power. It is a fact that the United States had become great power by 1898, yet it did not build a powerful military to conquer more territories in the Western Hemisphere. Similarly, in 1900s the United States was the most powerful economy in the world, yet it did not project her power to Europe or Northeast Asia. In the same vein, United Kingdom was substantially powerful between 1840 and 1860; yet it did not build its military power to dominate Europe. Mearsheimer explains the United States case by arguing that there were no worth while territories to be captured by her, and she was busy consolidating the huge North American landmass it had acquired. Similarly, the stopping power of water – the mighty Atlantic and the Pacific oceans were responsible to stop the United States from projecting her power into Europe and Northeast Asia. As regards the United Kingdom, the fact was that Europe was inhabited by many great powers at that time, which were difficult to be conquered. Moreover, stopping power of the English Channel hindered her power projection. Having examined this aspect, Mearshiemer goes on to establish the offshore balancing role of both the United States and the United Kingdom. "United States acted as an offshore balancer during the twentieth century to ensure that it remained the sole regional hegemon" (p.237). United Kingdom committed her military forces to the Continent when it could not pass the buck, or another power threatened to dominate Europe. She accepted the Continental commitment in both the World Wars; and in the Cold War continued to fulfill this commitment alongwith her forces in central Europe against the Soviet threat.

In chapter eight "Balancing versus Buck-Passing", Mearsheimer examines the strategies employed by the great powers to defend the balance of power by balancing or by passing the buck. The author highlights that decision to balance or to buck-pass is actually linked with structure of the international system. A bi-polar system favours balancing strategy. A multipolar system is more likely to offer buck-passing choice. Magnitude of threat and geography are the other factors in the decision to buck-pass. The author has examined Revolutionary and Napoleonic France (1789-1815) with respect to its strategic targets, calculus of power within France, and the power of other four states. The author concludes that

balancing against France by the European powers had remained problematic, and buck-passing had worked mostly for United Kingdom. The study of Cold War (1945-1990) is instructive in the sense that the end of World War-II had left the Soviet Union as the most important state in Europe and Northeast Asia. United State had no choice left to pass the buck. It had to “contain” the Soviet Union on its own. So it did throughout the Cold War. In a multipolar world, buck-passing is frequent. However, geography in the shape of common borders with the aggressor, or having buffer states or water body in between, has often influenced the decisions to buck-pass.

In chapter nine “The causes of Great Power War”, the author examines war as a strategy employed by the great powers to maximize their share of world power. The author acknowledges that security competition is a perpetual condition among the great powers, and war is an occasional happening. The author takes the help of the “structural theory” to explain the causes of war between states when at least one of the warring states is a great power. International anarchy is the main structural factor that causes war between states. As per the author “the main causes of war are located in the architecture of the international system” (p.337). The number of great powers and the distribution of power among them are other factors that influence war. Bipolar or multipolar configurations of the structure and power imbalance also increase or decrease the proneness to war. In a multipolar system, there is more chance of miscalculation of strength and resolve, which could lead to the decision to war. In a multipolar system, potential hegemons increase fear among other great powers. Fear leads to competition for power which is the recipe for conflict. The author draws heavily on the historical evidence from seven periods of European history starting from French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in 1792 to the end of the Cold War in 1990. The author states that during the 199-years of European history, there have been 24 great power wars including 3 central wars (war among all great powers), 6 great power vs. great power wars, and 15 great power vs. minor power wars. Consequently, bipolarity seems to be the most peaceful and least deadly architecture. Unbalanced multipolarity is by far the most war prone and deadly distribution of power that led to 3 central, 1 great power vs. great power and 5 great powers vs. minor power wars with

27 million military and as many civilian deaths. Balanced multipolarity falls between these two extremes with 1 great power vs. great power war and 9 great power vs. minor power war and 1.2 million casualties.

In the last chapter “Great Power Politics in the Twenty-first Century”, the author has discussed the future of the current century from the perspective of offensive realism. The author argues that despite the end of the Cold War and the optimism about great power cooperation, the realist theory holds as strong as ever. It is because the anarchic nature of international system has not changed; neither there are any signs that it would change. States do remain the most powerful actors in the system without any “night watch man” over them. He puts forward strong evidence from the decade of 1990-2000 to show that security competition among the great powers is on, both, in Europe as well as in Northeast Asia. There are one hundred thousand US troops each stationed in Northeast Asia and Europe. The author predicts that in the next about twenty years, there is likely to be greater instability in these regions due to changes in the power distribution and emergence of more powers. The author also predicts that the most dangerous potential threat to the United States in the early twenty-first century would be China.

‘Tragedy of Great Power Politics’ is a seminal work on the nature and behaviour of the international system from the perspective of the theory of offensive realism. The author has collected, analysed and presented huge historical data and record to support the cardinal aspects of his theory. There is little doubt that the author has made his points convincingly. He is very thorough and impressive in his realist arguments. However, his thesis that great powers are designed to behave in a ruthless, bloodthirsty and insatiable way to maximize their power because it is how the international system is structured-looks to be “deterministic” in character. I don’t really think that the system is absolute and all-powerful. There are scholars who say that international system is “socially constructed”, which means that the system is absolute because we have made it so; and anarchy is what states have made of it. If states followed some principles, norms and traditions, international anarchy can be reduced. The author seems to have ignored the impact of morality, international law, the United

Nations, and goodness of human nature on the state behaviour. Human beings and their social constructs – including the states - are not totally wicked and evil. It can't be. I look at this book with appreciation as regards its scholarly research. However, I don't wholly agree with the theory. Humanity and its structures have great promise, and are not slaves to structural determinism. The author has also not delved into the erosion of state sovereignty due to effects of globalization, and interdependence of great powers as manifested by politico-economic relationship within EU and between the United States and China. Similarly, the rise of non-state actors- both, with positive and negative roles- has also not been considered by the author while analyzing the behavior of great powers. I think realism of any sort has to take into account the influence and impact of these forces which were definitely not as pronounced in the past as they are now.

However, the book remains a must-reading for the students and scholars of international politics and strategic studies. It definitely helps in explaining the dynamics of international relations, and provides answers to some of the basic questions regarding the great power behavior.

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